

CHAPTER VIII

**THE NUMBER OF VARNAS,
THREE OR FOUR ?**

I

THAT there were from the very beginning four *Varnas* in the Indo-Aryan society is a view which is universally accepted by all classes of Hindus, and also by European scholars. If the thesis advanced in the last chapter, namely, that the Shudras were Kshatriyas is accepted, then it follows that this theory is wrong and that there was a time when there were only three *Varnas* in the Indo-Aryan society, viz., Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. Thus, the thesis, while it solves one problem, at the same time creates another. Whether anybody else sees the importance of this problem or not, I do. Indeed, I am aware of the fact that unless I succeed in proving that there were originally only three *Varnas*, my thesis that the Shudras were Kshatriyas may not be said to be proved beyond the shadow of a doubt.

While it is unfortunate that I should have landed on a thesis, which, while holding out a promise of solving the problem, creates another, I feel fortunate in having strong and cogent evidence to show that there were originally only three *Varnas* among the Indo-Aryans.

The first piece of evidence I rely upon is that of the Rig Veda itself. There are some scholars who maintain that the Varna system did not exist in the age of the Rig Veda. This statement is based on the view that the Purusha Sukta is an interpolation which has taken place long after the Rig Veda was closed. Even accepting that the Purusha Sukta is a later interpolation, it is not possible to accept the statement that the Varna system did not exist in the time of

the Rig Veda. Such a system is in open conflict with the text of the Rig Veda. For, the Rig Veda, apart from the Purusha Sukta, does mention Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas not once but many times. The Brahmins are mentioned as a separate *Varna* fifteen times, Kshatriyas nine times. What is important is that the Rig Veda does not mention Shudra as a separate *Varna*. If Shudras were a separate *Varna* there is no reason why the Rig Veda should not have mentioned them. The true conclusion to be drawn from the Rig Veda is not that the *Varna* system did not exist, but that there were only three *Varnas* and that Shudras were not regarded as a fourth and a separate *Varna*.

The second piece of evidence I rely on is the testimony of the two Brahmanas, the Satapatha and the Taittiriya. Both speak of the creation of three *Varnas* only. They do not speak of the creation of the Shudras as a separate.

The Satapatha Brahmana says :¹

II. 1.4.11.—“(Uttering), ‘bhuh’, Prajapati generated this earth. (Uttering) ‘bhuvah’ he generated the air, and (Uttering) ‘svah’ he generated the sky. This universe is co-extensive with these worlds. (The fire) is placed with the whole. Saying ‘bhuh’, Prajapati generated the Brahman; saying ‘bhuvah’ he generated the Kshattria; (and saying) ‘svah’, he generated the Vis. The fire is placed with the whole. (Saying) ‘bhuh’, Prajapati generated himself; (saying) ‘bhuvah’, he generated offspring : saying ‘svah’, he generated animals. This world is so much as self, offspring, and animals. (The fire) is placed with the whole.”

The Taittiriya Brahmana says²

III. 12.9.2.—“This entire (universe) has been created by Brahma. Men say that the Vaishya class was produced from *ric* verses. They say that the Yajur Veda is the womb from which the Kshattriya was born. The Sama Veda is the source from which the Brahmins sprang. This word the ancients declared to the ancients.”

Here is my evidence. It consists of an inference from the Rig Veda and two statements from two Brahmanas which in point of authority are co-equal with the Vedas. For both are Shruti both say in definite and precise terms that there were only three *Varnas*. Both agree that the Shudras did not form a separate and a distinct *Varna*, much less the fourth *Varna*. There cannot, therefore, be better evidence in support of my contention that there were originally only three *Varnas*

1 Muir, Vol. 1, p. 17.

2 Quoted by Muir, Vol. I, p. 17.

and that the Shudras were only a part of the second *Varna*.

II

Such is my evidence. On the other side, there is, of course, the evidence contained in the Purusha Sukta of the Rig Veda, which maintains that there were four *Varnas* from the very beginning. The question now is : which of the two should be accepted as the correct? How is this question to be decided? It cannot be decided by applying the rules of Mimamsa. If we did apply it, we will have to admit that both the statements, one in the Purusha Sukta that there were four *Varnas* and the statement in the two Brahmanas that there were three *Varnas*, are true. This is an absurd position. We must decide this matter in the light of the canons of historical criticism, such as sequence of time and intrinsic criticism, etc. The main question is whether the Purusha Sukta is a later composition added to the original Rig Veda. The question has been dealt with on the basis of the language of the Sukta as compared with the language of the rest of the Rig Veda. That it is a late production is the opinion of all scholars. This is what Colebrooke says :¹

“That remarkable hymn (the Purusha Sukta) is in language, metre, and style, very different from the rest of the prayers with which it is associated. It has a decidedly more modern tone; and must have been composed after the Sanskrit language had been refined, and its grammar and rhythm perfected. The internal evidence which it furnishes serves to demonstrate the important fact that the compilation of the Vedas, in their present arrangement, took place after the Sanskrit tongue had advanced from the rustic and irregular dialect in which the multitude of hymns and prayers of the Veda was composed, to the polished and sonorous language in which the mythological poems, sacred and profane (puranas and kavyas), have been written.”

In the opinion of Prof. Max Muller :²

“There can be little doubt, for instance, that the 90th hymn of the 10th book... is modern both in its character and in its diction. It is full of allusions to the sacrificial ceremonials, it uses technically philosophical terms, it mentions the three seasons in the order of Vasanta, spring, Grishma, summer and Sharad, autumn; it contains the only passage in the Rig Veda where the four castes are enumerated. The evidence of language for the modern date of this composition is equally strong. Grishma, for instance, the name for the hot season, does not occur in any other hymn of the Rig Veda; and Vasanta also, the name

¹ Quoted in Muir, Vol. I, p. 13,

² *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 13.

of spring does not belong to the earliest vocabulary of the Vedic poets. It occurs but once more in the Rig Veda (x.161.4), in a passage where the three seasons are mentioned in the order of Sharad, autumn; Hemanta, winter; and Vasanta, spring.”

Prof. Weber observes :¹

“That the Purusha Sukta, considered as a hymn of the Rig Veda, is among the latest portions of that collection, is clearly perceptible from its contents. The fact that the Sama Samhita has not adopted any verse from it, is not without importance (compare what I have remarked in my Academical Prelections). The Naigeya school, indeed, appears (although it is not quite certain) to have extracted the first five verses in the seventh prapathaka of the first Archika, which is peculiar to it.”

III

This is one line of argument. There is also another line of argument which also helps us to determine whether the Purusha Sukta is an earlier or later production. For this it is necessary to find out how many Samhitas of the Vedas have adopted the Purusha Sukta. Examining the different Vedas and the Samhitas, the position is as follows :

The Sama Veda produces only 5 verses from the Purusha Sukta. As to the White Yajur Veda, the Vajasaneyi Samhita includes it but the difference between the two is great. The Purusha Sukta, as it stands, in the Rig Veda, has only 16 verses. But the Purusha Sukta in the Vajasaneyi Samhita has 22 verses. Of the Black Yajur Veda there are three Samhitas available at present. But none of the three Samhitas, the Taittiriya, the Katha and the Maitrayani, gives any place to the Purusha Sukta. The Atharva Veda is the only Veda which contains a more or less exact reproduction of the Purusha Sukta of the Rig Veda.

The text of the Purusha Sukta, as it occurs in the different Vedas, is not uniform. The six additional verses of the Vajasaneyi Samhita are special to it and are not to be found in the text as it occurs in the Rig Veda, the Sama Veda or the Atharva Veda. There is another difference which relates to verse 16. The 16th verse of the Rig Veda is to be found neither in the Atharva Veda nor in the Sama Veda nor in the Yajur Veda. Similarly, the 16th verse of the Atharva Veda is to be found neither in the Rig Veda nor in the Yajur Veda. Of the fifteen

1 Quoted by Muir, Vol. I, p. 14.

verses, which are common to the three Vedas, their texts are not, identical. Nor is the order in which the verses stand in the three Vedas the same as may be seen from the following table :

<i>Yajur Veda</i>	<i>Rig Veda</i>	<i>Sama Veda</i>	<i>Atharva Veda</i>
1	1	3	1
2	2	5	4
3	3	6	3
4	4	4	2
5	5	7	9
6	8	*	10
7	9	*	11
8	10	*	14
9	7	*	13
10	11	*	12
11	12	*	5
12	13	*	6
13	14	*	7
14	6	*	8
15	15	*	15
16†	16	*	16†
17	*	*	*
18	*	*	*
19	*	*	*
20	*	*	*
21	*	*	*
22	*	*	*

The point is that if the Purusha Sukta had been an old, hoary text, sanctified by ancient tradition, could the other Vedas have taken such a liberty with it? Could they have changed it and chopped it as they have done?

The place of the Purusha Sukta in the hymns of the different Vedas is also very significant. In the Rig Veda it occurs in the miscellaneous part and in the Atharva Veda it occurs in what is known as the supplementary part. If it was the earliest composition of the Rig Veda, why should it have been placed in such inconsequential

*Means that these Verses are not to be found.

†Means that they are not identical.

collection? What do these points suggest? They suggest that :

- (1) If the Purusha Sukta was not incorporated in the Taittiriya, Kathaka and Maitrayani Samhitas of the Black Yajur Veda, it follows, that the Purusha Sukta was added to the Rig Veda after the Taittiriya Samhita, the Kathaka Samhita, the Maitrayani Samhita of the Black Yajur Veda.
- (2) That it had to be put in the miscellaneous and supplementary portions of the Vedas shows that it was composed at a later stage.
- (3) That the freedom which the authors of the different Samhitas took in adding, omitting and recording the verses shows that they did not regard it as an ancient hymn, which they were bound to reproduce in its exact original form.

These points go a long way in furnishing corroborative evidence in support of the views held by Prof. Max Muller and others that the Purusha Sukta is a later interpolation.

IV

The difference in the form of the stanzas in the Purusha Sukta is also very noteworthy. Anyone who reads the Purusha Sukta will find that except for these two verses, viz., 11 and 12, the whole of it is in the narrative form. But the two verses, which explain the origin of the four Varnas, are in the form of question and answer. The point is : Why should these verses be introduced in a question form breaking the narrative form? The only explanation is that the writer wanted to introduce a new matter and in a pointed manner. This means that not only the Purusha Sukta is a later addition to the Rig Veda, but these particular verses are much later than even the Purusha Sukta.

Some critics have gone to the length of saying that the Purusha Sukta is a forgery by the Brahmins to bolster up their claim to superiority. Priests are known to have committed many forgeries. The Donations of Constantine and Pseudo-Isidore Decretals are well known forgeries in the history of the Papacy. The Brahmins of India were not free from such machinations. How they changed the original word 'Agre' into 'Agne' to make Rig Veda give support to the burning of widows has been pointed out by no less an authority than Prof. Max Muller. It is well-known how in the time of the East India Company a whole Smriti was fabricated to support the case of a plaintiff. There is, therefore, nothing surprising if the Brahmins did

forge the Purusha Sukta, if not the whole, at least the two verses 11 and 12, at some later stage, long after the fourth *Varna* had come into being, with a view to give the system of *Chaturvarnya* the sanction of the Veda.

V

Is the Purusha Sukta earlier than the Brahmanas? This question is distinct and separate from the first. It may be that the Purusha Sukta belongs to the later part of the Rig Veda. Yet, if the Rig Veda as a whole is earlier than the Brahmanas, the Purusha Sukta would still be earlier than the Brahmanas. The question, therefore, needs to be separately considered.

It is Prof. Max Muller's view that in the growth of the Vedic literature the order was Vedas, then Brahmanas and thereafter the Sutras. If this proposition was adopted, it would mean that the Purusha Sukta must be earlier than the Brahmanas. Question is : Can Prof. Max Muller's proposition be accepted as absolute? If it was accepted as absolute, the proposition would lead to two conclusions:

- (1) That in the time of the Rig Veda there were four *Varnas* and at the time of the Satapatha Brahmana they became three; or
- (2) that the tradition is not completely recorded in the Satapatha Brahmana.

It is obvious that both these conclusions are absurd and must be rejected. The first is absurd on the face of it. The second is untenable because the theory of the evolution of *Varnas* by the two Brahmanas is different from that set out in the Purusha Sukta and is complete in itself. The absurdity of the result is inevitable if one were to take Max Muller's proposition as absolute. The proposition cannot be taken as absolute to mean that no Brahmana was composed until all the Samhitas had come into being. On the other hand, it is quite possible as pointed out by Professors Belvalkar and Ranade that most of these compositions are composite and synchronous and, therefore, one part of the Vedas can be earlier than another part and that a part of the Brahmanas can be earlier than parts of the Vedas. If this is a correct view then there is nothing inherently improbable in holding that the parts of the Satapatha Brahmana and of the Taittiriya Brahmana, which record the legend that there were at one time only three *Varnas*, are earlier than the Purusha Sukta of the Rig Veda.

What is the conclusion which follows from this examination of the Purusha Sukta? There is only one conclusion, that the Sukta is an addition to the Rig Veda made at a later stage and is, therefore, no argument that there were four Varnas from the very beginning of the Aryan Society.

For the reasons given above, it will be seen that my thesis about the origin of the Shudras creates no problem such as the one mentioned in the beginning of this Chapter. If it did appear to create a problem, it was because of the assumption that the Purusha Sukta was an authentic and genuine record of what it purports to say. That assumption has now been shown to be quite baseless. I, therefore, see no difficulty in concluding that there was a time when the Aryan Society had only three *Varnas* and the Shudras belonged to the second or the Kshatriya *Varna*.

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